

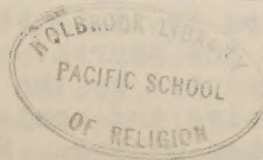
"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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The Role of the Town and Country Church in the Light of Today's Needs

By Herbert E. Stotts*

I have been a minister for a quarter of a century. During this period of time, I have proceeded along the traditional "lines of least resistance" in church administration. I was primarily concerned to do those things which were acceptable to my peers, to my fellow ministers and to laymen in the local church. In the church in which I am a minister, membership acquisition, church-building, the improvement of physical facilities, the raising of budgets (both for local church and for benevolences) are the prime criteria by means of which the success of a pastor's administration are measured. These, coupled with popularity in the pulpit and out of it, tend to sum up what a great many people expect of a minister in terms of a Philosophy of Church Administration.

I confess that only recently have I become aware of many basic assumptions upon which I had been operating in a Philosophy of Church Administration. This has been effective in my own experience in work in the Town and Country Church, while teaching in the seminary for eleven years and doing religious research on several thousand Town and Country Churches. It is amazing that I had never before really stopped to analyze my basic Philosophy of Church Administration. It is this which we wish to share.

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The basic assumptions we have attempted to formulate for this occasion are rather widely accepted among the Protestant clergy.

(1) The Church Should, at Least, Serve the Community Adjacent to Its Buildings. Each local church has a responsibility defined by the roles which the community ascribes to it. One of the roles which the community ascribes to it is the responsibility of serving the people who live nearest the church. Interestingly enough, this responsibility is not always accepted by the leaders of the church. We tend to be selective, exclusive and socially appropriate to some strata in the community more than others. However, it is true that the community expects the Church to serve the people who are closest to it.

(2) Church Members Have the Responsibility to Support and Attend Services of Worship at the Church in Which They Have Their Membership. This, as so many other platitudes, seems to be accepted on the surface, but in fact is very seldom the way in which churches and church members fulfil their role. When one unites with the Church he is quick to promise that he will continue to support his church. Actually, the majority of persons who are inactive in churches at the present time are those who either live out of the community and have not bothered to transfer their letter, or those who still reside within the community but have too little respect for the church. A great many ministers, as well as laymen, argue vehemently that a person has no responsibility to attend the Church in which he has membership. This I find is inconsistent with my point of view.

(3) Each Church Member and Self-Defined Constituent Can be Expected to Support His Church Financially. Church surveys turn up people who claim to be members of churches in which they have no listed membership. Those who are members, as well as those who feel they are related to the Church, have a moral responsibility to contribute to the Church regularly and to help support it as their church home. In a recent study of Town and Country Churches of Northern Indiana, it was amazing to us to discover that dozens of churches had no regular pattern of contributions. Laymen were not expected to support the Church in terms of pledges, regular Sunday morning offerings, or any type of predictable income. This is a basic assumption which has always governed my own ministry, and I am somewhat surprised to find that there are a great many people who disagree with me.

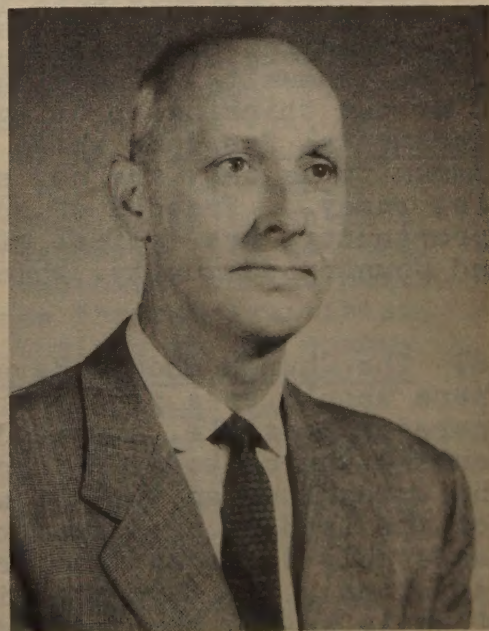
(4) Each Church Has the Responsibility of Providing Appropriate and Attractive Services of Worship for Its Parish and the Contiguous Neighborhood. It has a responsibility to minister to their spiritual and social needs through adequate programming and organizational structures. Much of our attention in the past has been directed toward the support of the Church by the community rather than the support of the community by the Church. As the member has a responsibility toward the Church in attendance, financial support, and participation...., in an even greater way, the Church, being an Institution of God for the purpose of mediating the faith to its parish, has a great responsibility also. The Church has a responsibility which is clear and disturbing... to make its buildings, its

programs, its activities, its services of worship, its functions in behalf of the parish... as attractive, helpful, appealing, fulfilling and reverent as possible.

Because laymen and ministers tend to take larger churches as their standards of excellence, the characteristic sound of complaint in rural church planning meetings is "We can't do that here"; "we're short of leadership"; "we are overloaded now with organizations"; "everybody here tonight belongs to at least a dozen organizations besides this one, etc." This is to say, in essence, that the Church is put in a place where it stands no higher than any other organization in the community; it seems to deserve nothing more than this in the minds of the people and it provides nothing more than other organizations provide. This is one role that can be redefined. People within a community who have come to expect little, if anything, from the Church, and therefore, have prescribed for it a small role in their expectations are quite surprised and pleased when the church comes to redefine its role in providing services, functions and activities for the community.

(5) The Mutual Association of Church and Parish Should Even-
tuate in a Strong Sense of Commitment and an Awareness of Mutual
Representation. Each churchman should be proud of his church. In the same way no local church should bemean, belittle or underrate those who are its neighbors, its members or its responsibility. This basic assumption is subject to misrepresentation if we do not explain it clearly. Interestingly enough, one of the basic ideals of every human being is that he be recognized, that he have status, that his name means something when he is introduced to someone. In the same way, he wants to be proud of his church; he does not want to go about the community apologizing for it and making excuses for its inadequacies. Similarly the Church has the responsibility for the total task of Christian dignity and status. It should be proud of the people who are its members. It does not do the Church any credit in the eyes of its critics to be an apologetic institution.

(6) The Church Should Have a Grow-
ing Sense of Purpose and a Commensurate
Awareness of the Emergent Needs of its
Members and Constituents. It is not enough to assume that roles and purposes of the preceding generation are enough to compel devotion to the Church today. The spiritual Sputniks of our time have hurtled into the orbit of the Town and Country Church without our being aware of their existence. Moral problems unknown in the day of the founding fathers of our churches confront us now. I find myself torn between a loyalty to preach-



ments against yesterday's minor sins of card-playing , dancing and smoking and a concern that we condone atom bomb tests without protest... We quietly accept the immoralities of prostrated intellects which could have been directed toward good and creative effort. I think of a young relative of mine, whose Ph.D. degree at Ohio State University was in the area of organic chemistry. His research was creative and he was well on the way toward discovering a new cure for one of the major intestinal diseases. When he had completed his Ph.D. degree he would have been quite happy to remain on in his work, but he was offered his choice of four positions at double the salary he would have gotten as a member of the faculty of Ohio State University. He felt, whether wisely or not, that he could not afford to stay on at the University in this needed area of research. My beloved predecessor, Pat McConnell at Boston University School of Theology, had a pet saying that had to do with this kind of problem. He contended that we need a "new set of sins."

Into all of our communities we have moving at the present time employees of research laboratories , professional people whose skills and responsibilities are being suborned to tasks which demean the human spirit as well as those which will exalt and enhance it. We face decisions about the use of skills which we as pastors and laymen today do not understand. The Church needs organizations which fulfill needs unknown to the preceding generation.

(7) The Church Has a Role as a Conservative Institution. Traditionally this was the dominant role which the community expected of the Town and Country Church. If it expected nothing else of us, it expected us to be conservative. We mean this in terms of conserving the traditions, customs and mores, as well as the morals of the community. Today this responsibility tends to be redefined in my own thinking as being a responsibility for conserving the fundamental freedoms which are possible in the Town and Country community as they are not so easily possible in the urban communities today. Freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom of opportunity, are typical of those characteristics within the Town and Country community, which the Church must conserve.

(8) The Church Should Have a Dispersed Democratic Leadership Base. There should be a plan of recruiting and training leadership and, wherever possible, a method of rotating its leaders. The Town and Country Church today suffers more than any other type of church from the authoritarian tradition of the rural community. It is difficult for the leaders of a church which has always known authoritarian leadership to accept the principles of democratic discussions and decisions. The farm home in which the father has made all the decisions is seldom the seedbed for democratic leadership. Similarly, the rural church in which a handful of persons have always made the

basic decisions, finds it quite difficult to inculcate free-thinking newcomers into the fellowship.

The conflict between the old and the new is not merely the conflict between generations, or length of residence factors, or denominational interests. It comes from the tradition within the home of freedom of speech on the one hand and suppression of speech on the other. As we have worked with hundreds of churches in which student pastors have served and others which we have studied and surveyed, I have become increasingly confirmed in the belief that people in the large can be trusted to make decisions relative to problems of churchmanship and that there are no people in the congregation who are incapable of leadership. I have become more and more convinced that the Church needs to recruit new leadership, train new leadership, and rotate its present leaders so that all of the people of the Church will come to realize some of the problems of responsible stewardship.

(9) The Church is at the Same Time Family-Like and Understanding and Impersonal to the Point of Legal Commitment Formally Stated -- The Church is at Once a Gemeinschaft and a Gesellschaft Institution. There may be better terms than this, but I don't know them. Gemeinschaft means "family-like" and it describes the kind of community which most of us sentimentally desire the Church to be. Gesellschaft is nearly synonymous with contractual. This is becoming more and more difficult in a day like ours. Even the Church in the rural community finds that it tends to serve only one phase of a person's life and that it finds itself immersed in many other things which seem to many to be related to churchmanship. The kind of family-like concern for all the phases of a person's life that was true years ago is decreasingly true in today's church. While theological compulsion drives many of us to talk of the "Koinonia" (The Blessed Community) and similar concepts of family-like churchmanship, we find that the Church is being increasingly driven toward being a legal institution which must stand on its own feet and accept the responsibility for the tough decisions which are a part of an urban-like world. It can no longer take lightly its responsibility to rural churches overseas, to the World Council of Churches, to the State Council of Churches, Christian Rural Overseas Program activities, The Farm Bureau, the Grange and other institutions in the community. These contractual obligations of the Church are becoming more and more important and must be accepted as normal and not antithetical to the very nature of the Church as such. Summarily, the Town and Country Church is a family-like institution but at the same time a contractual legalistic institution which accepts responsibilities as any other institution in the community.

Against the background of these basic assumptions, let us look at some verifiable conclusions which we have discovered through research. It will help us to understand how they relate to the emerging role of the Church in the modern community.

VERIFIABLE CONCLUSIONS:

(1) There is a positive correlation between the number of groups in a church and the role of relative "success" which they portray. Stated more formally, diversified and proliferated small groups are positively correlated with successful church programming. Experiments in churchmanship have been conducted which validated this. We have suggested that church school classes of 35 be divided into three classes of 12 each, with a resultant growth to 15 enrolled and active in each of the classes, an increase which would have been impossible with the limited quarters and leadership opportunities of the larger group. Entire church school programs redesigned along this line of smaller groups with wider dispersal of activities has similarly increased the number of people participating, as it has increased the number of leadership opportunities.

(2) There is no necessary correlation between "family-centered programming" and church growth. When we arrange the Town and Country congregation by size of household, we find as many as 2/3 of them with no "family" in the home. That is, the home has no parent-child arrangement. A typical county-seat town has within it a great many retired people who either live alone or with their spouse following retirement. In addition to this, there are a great many young people employed in the town as well as those who are yet in school. This is always an amazing thing to the Official Board member who has in his mind the "typical family" in his church as being a family with a father and mother and three children resident at home. This is far from being the characteristic household in the average Town and Country Church. When this is the case, the Church needs to plan not a family-centered program but two programs, one for families as families and the other for individuals who have a quite different set of needs and interests. Special interest programs which are designed for individuals are as necessary in today's Town and Country Church as they are in the urban situation.

(3) There is a correlation between a pyramidal age and sex distribution and the futurity of churches. If a church does not bring on a group of young people into church membership each year, if it fails to recruit young adults for leadership positions in the church, if no children are being born in the church families, the church can depend upon dying in the future. As we go down the age ladder from 85 years of age to 1 year, the number of persons in each age group should be increasingly larger in descending order. It therefore, becomes part of the moral responsibility of the Town and Country Church to do everything it can to assist young adults to come to live in the community where the church is located, to keep young people at home and to provide opportunities for employment, social outreach and educational achievement for them.

(4) Multiplication of leadership is necessary to growth. Stated more formally, centripetal leadership planning leads to lassitude within the parish. What we mean here is that leadership which always works toward the center centripetally and makes no effort to multiply itself nor to involve others in the outer circle of the church's

activity tends to create a discouraging church in which to work. This may seem like an endless cycle, but it is a verifiable one nevertheless. When leadership is not shared, this very lack of sharing suppresses the potential leader.

(5) In Protestant churches occupational groupings tend to cluster in modal uniformity. In recent studies of 130 Protestant churches in selected areas in Texas, Indiana and New England, this remarkable facet came into complete focus. In every instance, save one, out of 130 churches studied, the modal occupational category coupled with a contiguous category on either side, a total of three occupational groupings out of eleven possible, portrayed totals of not less than 40 percent and not more than 60 percent of all gainfully employed persons in the congregation. The mean was 49.6 percent.

(6) Membership acquisition must progress at a rate of at least 5 percent a year to maintain the membership. Worded in another way, this hypothesis can be used as an index. We have discovered that whenever a church classifies its membership by length of residence, this is a most revealing item. If less than 17.5 percent of the membership have united with this church during the last six years, a church is generally on the decline. If more than 17.5 percent have united with the church during the last six years, it is typically holding its own or increasing in membership.

(7) It is more expensive per capita to maintain part-time pastoral leadership in small churches than to have larger parish groupings and full-time ordained pastors. In the Indiana Study, churches of 50 to 99 members averaged \$12.26 per capita for pastoral support, or a total salary of \$1,312 per year, whereas a church with more than 100 and less than 300 members averaged \$10.53 per capita for pastoral support, or a total of \$2,570. per year. On the other hand, churches of 300 to 500 members average \$10.90 per capita for pastoral support and paid an average salary of \$4,200 per year. Coupled with the problem of salary and proportional salary support, one must ask at the same time whether we can justify assigning a full-time resident minister to a congregation of fifty people, even if they have the funds to support him adequately ?

To simplify this total picture and to make brisk and clear the meaning of the research which we have reviewed here, I would like to list what I sincerely believe to be some suggestions of merit for Town and Country Church program planning.

1. No church should have less than the supervision of a full-time ordained minister.
2. Ideally, no minister should be asked to serve a congregation, however dispersed, of less than 300, nor more than 600 persons.
3. Each church should have a diversified program, tailored not to traditional needs alone but to the social and spiritual needs of its present congregation.
4. The residents of every community should have the choice of churches or church programs within the community church which are appropriate to their spiritual and social needs.
5. Groupings of churches in order to attain this recommended parish size should be oriented around economic trade centers or logical social groupings.
6. Laymen, as well as the ministers, must be given the opportunity to take in-service training in the conduct and operation of the Town and Country Church. Lay speakers, business managers, staff persons and volunteer workers will be needed to man a coordinated and enlarged program of the kind we envision.
7. The Church must see itself in the perspective of the challenges which the World Church places upon us today through cooperative planning, education and research. Each local church layman must be related to the ecumenical movement and made aware of his citizenship responsibilities as a Christian.

It becomes insistently clear to some of us that the role of the Town and Country Church in the light of today's needs must be redefined ----- or it will cease to exist!

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